

# Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS)

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## Abstract

OEPS is a new cross-sector project led by the Open University in Scotland (OUiS) and funded by the Scottish Funding Council. OEPS has its origins in OER projects carried out by the OUiS over the last four years. In most cases these have involved close partnership between the university and other organisations that would not normally be involved in the creation of educational materials. OEPS aims to build on these approaches, and on other valuable experience from across the Scottish sector, to increase the use of open resources in Scotland and support widening participation and transitions. The project is multi-stranded, involving a wide range of partners in development work. Integral to the project methodology is a process of embedded research and evaluation aimed at understanding and evidencing good practice. In this short paper we share the progress of the project to date and highlight some of the questions and issues that are emerging.

## Introduction

The potential for OER to transform higher education (HE) has been widely remarked (e.g. Welsh Government, 2014). Other authors (e.g. D'Antoni, 2013) have explored the contribution that OER can make to widening participation in HE and in recasting the traditional boundaries between universities and the rest of society. However, the evidence suggests that this promised transformation is yet to happen. So, for example, a recent OECD report (Falconer et al, 2013) found limited impact on lifelong learning across Europe. The data on MOOC demographics is well known; currently most of those studying on massive open online courses are already in possession of higher education qualifications (Edinburgh University, 2013, Lane, 2013).

Scottish higher education has a distinctive ethos of education as a public good and a strong focus on cross-sector partnership and inter-institutional collaboration (Bryce

et al, 2013). The OEPS project has its origins in a number of Scottish OER projects carried out in this context by the OUIS. The projects have involved partnership working with people and organisations with which the university has built up long-term relationships (Cannell, 2013; Macintyre, 2013). They have been part of a broader strategic approach to widening participation through partnerships. To varying degrees the development of new online content in the projects involved a process of co-creation, combining the knowledge and lived experience of students and professionals with academic knowledge and skills in learning design (Macintyre op cit). Designing in a participative way with partners ensures that content production and its use are appropriately contextualised. And crucially the content and its use are embedded in the partner's established social networks. This has enabled the use of the OER courses at significant scale. We have argued elsewhere (Cannell and Macintyre, 2014) that it may be helpful to consider extending the definition of Open Educational Practices (OEP) to embrace the social and networks within which learners and the organisations that they are linked to are situated.

### **Developing Opening Educational Practice**

OEPS aims to build on the experience of the OUIS OER projects and on other innovative practice in Scotland and internationally to enable large-scale use of OER to support transitions from informal to formal learning. The project has two principle aims<sup>1</sup>:

- To facilitate best practice in open education in Scotland through the development of a peer support network, an online hub and awareness raising activities.
- To enhance the Scottish tertiary education sector's capacity and reputation in developing publicly available online materials supported by high quality pedagogy and learning technology.

Since its inception the project team has established partnerships with almost forty organisations. At the time of writing these include universities, colleges, trade unions, third sector and non-departmental public bodies with regional or national reach.

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<sup>1</sup> For the project objectives got to [www.oepscotland.org](http://www.oepscotland.org)

Typically work with a partner begins with one or more relatively informal discussions. These often focus on assessing the partner's level of engagement with open education and clarifying the nature of a possible project. In these discussions we ask participants to reflect on why they want to engage with OER, what it enables for them and crucially what it enables for their learners. We find our focus on what OER does in the world a useful way to develop a shared understanding and maintain a focus on educational practice and the use of free and open resources Taken together these conversations are invaluable in helping to scope a broad picture of the interest and engagement with OER and OEP across Scotland. As part of the project's remit to research and evidence the scope and direction of development of OEP in Scotland the project team has adopted a systematic approach to collecting evidence and a strong emphasis on developing reflective accounts of practice.

In some cases partners are interested in exploring what 'open' means in their context and we have developed workshop designs for this purpose. In other instances partners are able to share examples of good practice, which we can work up and share with the sector. Some are interested in the potential of already existing OER to support their work and we are collaborating on the development of practices to support these developments. Finally, some partners are interested in developing OER **and** new practices and in this case we deliver a series of Learning Design workshops to support the initial stages of development.

An important output from the project will be a Scottish hub for Open Educational Practice. The aim is not to develop another OER repository. We will make use of OpenLearnWorks<sup>2</sup> (OLW) the OU 's platform, which is open and free for everyone to use. Over the course of the project we will be enhancing the function of this VLE repository to improve usability for learners and crucially for fellow educators. The hub, however, is planned to be a separate site with a specific social and community focus. It will be wrapped around OLW and act as place where educators and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/>

learners can get support for the development of practice and for the growth of communities in which practitioners can share good practice and new approaches. For example, we are working with Scottish Union Learning (SUL), the learning arm of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, to develop a large cohort of open learning champions (c.f. Pudner, 2015) based in workplaces across Scotland. The hub community function will develop in dialogue with SUL and provide tools, support and curation of suitable links to support union learning representatives in their roles.

The academic literature associated with widening participation includes a rich discussion of the barriers to engagement with education that impact on non-traditional students (for example McGivney, 1999, 2000). Authors concerned with the role of open education in widening participation have also noted the importance of these factors (Lane, 2008). Arguably, however, this practice and theoretically based knowledge has not informed discussions around OEP to the extent that it should.

Workshops with union and third sector partners, interested in using open education in their context, have elicited valuable insights into how widening participation barriers are articulated in a digital world. For some potential students the basic skills that allow digital participation are a prerequisite; increasingly many are confident users of mobile devices but for a limited range of functions which are not understood as part of a world of learning. Affective and cultural barriers and issues of self-perception and identity remain critical. The people we work with are familiar with social functions of information searching activities and while these are important components of learning an affordances of online learning they are not perceived in this way. Moreover in an online environment potential users are bewildered by the huge choice available and find established repositories intimidating. There is a strong demand from union and third sector partners for the creation of supportive support routes into OER resources that include the curation of suitable starting materials and clearly marked pathways.

The project is working with universities and colleges. A small number of institutions in Scotland are developing policy on the use of OER (UCISA, 2014); a larger number have been influenced by the high public and media profile of MOOCs. A small number of institutions are now part of Future Learn and Edinburgh University also publishes MOOCs on Coursera. However, the evidence to date suggests that there is little likelihood of the majority pursuing this approach. The Open Scotland network provides an active focus for educational technologists and has produced the Scottish Open Education Declaration<sup>3</sup>. The declaration provides a helpful support for an important part of the OEPS objectives aimed at encouraging the development of institutional policy with respect to open education and to create links between educational technology experts and colleagues who have interests in widening participation or learning and teaching more generally.

With the exception of some very small-scale initiatives under the aegis of JISC and some work at Borders College there has not been significant activity in Scotland involving Open Badges until recently. The Borders College example is interesting in that there is now a well-established system for badging staff CPD that is mostly delivered in face-to-face mode. Borders is also using badges with employers for whom the college provides CPD. One strand of the OUIS OER development, now linked to OEPS, has been a rich source of experience in the iterative reversioning of OER in response to external demand. This has generated a set of five open badges, centred around 'The Reflection Toolkit'<sup>4</sup> and 'Caring Counts'<sup>5</sup>, two OERs aimed at supporting educational and employment transitions. Over the next few months the project will monitor the take up of these new badged courses and also work with partners to develop practices that enable the use and adaptation of the Open University's new badged online access courses.

## Discussion

In a wide-ranging set of studies of Asian universities Dhanajaran and Abeywardena (2013) found that only a small minority of staff take the opportunity to reuse, revise,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://declaration.openscot.net>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/course/view.php?id=843>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/course/view.php?id=1688>

remix and redistribute OER. A similar study is planned by the project, but the evidence from the meetings, workshops and seminars that we have held so far is that a similar situation prevails in Scotland. Our findings to date suggest that the key priority in expanding the level of use of OER is the development of greater understanding of the open education agenda. There is real demand for engagement with OER outside the academy that is currently not being met.

The partnership based OERs produced in the Scottish context, which formed the impetus for OEPS, have matured and developed since the project began. They continue to provide positive evidence for the role that open education has to play in broadening opportunities for non-traditional learners. Effective practice requires a redrawing of boundaries so that practitioners and academics can work together in a process of co-creation and participatory design. Whether partners are interested in developing new material, or find that existing OER may be relevant for their purposes, they are often concerned that material should be bespoke.

Conventionally 'bespokeness' is considered to be an attribute of the content of the OER, some of our evidence suggests that a greater concentration on the practices associated with use enables contextualisation and allows both effective use but also more widespread use. Co-creation can relate to new content but much more importantly it is an important component of OEP.

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